

The Julian Lecture 2019

'Companions in Solitude'

**Ministering from the cave of the heart in
companionship with Julian**



Fr Bruce Batstone CJN, ObJn

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Bruce Batstone was one of the first four Companions of Julian, received in 2009. A parish priest in North London, Bruce is a spiritual director, and is also involved in the training of directors as a tutor on the London based Ignatian Spirituality Course. He is also oblate of the Order of Julian of Norwich.

[2] In 1993 I spent some weeks in a Benedictine lay community at Ealing Abbey, in West London. There were a number of us coming and going in those weeks across the summer holidays, and one important memory in these formative days is of what's called a 'month day'. In a monastery, a month day is a day off once a month when the usual daily routine is suspended and monks can do as they please. On this memorable occasion, Fr James (the monk coordinating this fresh monastic expression) took two of us to visit an East End parish and meet with a sister living a life of service and prayer in one of its districts. I remember just brimming with life after this experience, hearing about her daily practice of contemplative prayer which inspired her urban ministry of love, witness and accompaniment. This seed has stayed with me, and germinated in my life, and whilst dormant for a while, is now pushing through the surface and dislodging some aspects, and insisting I make some changes it seems.

My journey towards Julian began a long time ago, probably as far back as 14th June 1990. Strangely specific you may think, but this is the date of my confirmation when I was given a copy of *In Love Enclosed*, a well known collection of Julian's writings selected by Fr Robert Llewellyn. My first visit to the Cell was in about 1994 I think: I was teaching and living in Kings Lynn, attending All Saints Church, and brought here for the first time by my parish priest. I remember the visit well, inspired by Fr Robert's abandoned shoes in the Cell. He was somewhere else, but I now see the evidence of a praying presence in this holy place was another moment of formative encounter.

Today, as a Companion and Oblate of Julian, trying to live openly to her accompaniment, seeking to be available to the [3] message that her Revelations might live in me as fertile ground from which I might

minister (what Julian herself might call the ground of God's goodness) it is here that I know my roots are trying to grow deeper into, and this is what I want to spend time reflecting on today.

I don't think any of this is actually new. Looking back on my life, I can see there has been a feature of aloneness throughout. Somewhat a loner as a child, my own company was always my preference. As a teenager, whilst I had many friends, deep friendships were not really a predominant part of life. I transitioned from primary to secondary school, and prayer began to seem important, and a daily encounter with God slowly evolved, long before any traditional practice of churchgoing was routine for me.

At university, now well established in a worshipping community, confirmed at nineteen, a call to ordained ministry was under exploration. This morphed into a testing of the religious life with the Society of St Francis for a year, then a return to the teaching career begun on graduation, and within two years I was training for ordination to the priesthood at the age of twenty seven.

Looking back, whilst I see a very privileged opportunity to test various ways of life to which God may have been calling me, the daily deep desire to set aside significant amounts of time to be alone with God remained constant. I remember a significant moment of understanding about this current that had swept me along. I picked up a small book by a nun who subsequently was a Companion for a while: *Through Julian's Windows*, by Sister Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, presented me for the first time with an account of eremiticism. Quoting Eugene Stockton, an Australian secular priest who came to^[4] England to make a study of contemporary hermits, Obbard writes:

Solitaries themselves I found [...] exhibited a wide variety of

*states and lifestyles. They were religious belonging to convents and monasteries, parish clergy in active ministry, married couples, business people, retirees, singles in high-rise flats, women baby-sitting houses, animators of houses of prayer, a priest straddling a place of strict solitude and a place of hospitality, one like a guru or starets seeking and imparting wisdom in an Indian-style ashram[....] The solitary is not a quasi monk or nun out of place in the world, but one who seeks solitude in the midst of, and in communion with, the world. Some live in rhythmic solitude, alternating periods of solitude with periods of greater involvement in an active ministry according to the pattern of St Francis; others seek a more complete withdrawal. What is important for the person so called is not to strive to conform to a certain definition of hermit, but to seek to answer the call to be alone with God in the given conditions of his or her life.'*¹

I knew of the hermit Brother Ramon SSF, but that is all, and Obbard's book showed me something about myself I had never really noticed before: that my basic vocation is, I think, to a form of solitude. I believe I might be called, fundamentally, to a semi-eremitic life.

Now, it may be helpful if I define my terms. What do I mean by semi-eremitic? Well, I do not believe I am currently called ^[5]to a life of continual solitude, but my explorations in living this semi-eremitic life has meant that my sense of vocation to community as a member of a household, and my sense of fulfilment living as a parish priest, is making sense, for what feels like the first time, by being nurtured and renewed by times of silence apart: daily, weekly, monthly and annually.

Incidentally, as a result of reading the book, and subsequently corresponding with the author, I heard of the plans to create a new communion of solitaires based around the life of this cell: The Companions of Julian began a decade ago.

In this lecture I would like to explore with you what this vocational discernment has come to mean for me, and the shape in which practicing this solitude has begun to reveal itself. To do this, I want to share with you some of my 'pin-ups', whose lives and example have encouraged me, with a particular focus on three of them: Brother Charles de Foucauld, Father Bill Kirkpatrick and of course Mother Julian in whose presence we gather today.

I want also to reflect on three missional possibilities that I believe the life of solitude can offer the church today. I've called them:

simply being here;

committedly remaining here;

and rooting ourselves in the here and now deep in the God who calls us.

Let me say a bit more about each one.

^[6]**Simply being here** is about hiddenness, a deeply appealing concept resonant within a semi-eremitic calling. 'Simply being here' is about presence. I know that as a 'ministry of presence', this struggles to sit with what the church at large believes it has come to need from missional presence which we are told requires a greater articulation of the Christian message. In effect a deeper and more intentional desire to evangelise. The eremitic tradition is indeed very

hidden - as I said earlier I didn't know about it - but it has offered much through the Christian centuries, and still does so, in the way of mission today and I believe we see this in Mother Julian, Brother Charles and in Father Bill.

Remaining here is about stability. This concept of staying, so resonant with the monastic tradition of course, is about perseverance in the darkness where faith is challenged. This can be in life, in prayer, and probably both, and often its symptoms are expressed through boredom and restlessness.

In exploring this, I have been much inspired by a book by the writer Elaine Heath. Dean of Duke Divinity School in the United States, Heath offers an account of what she thinks contemplative vision might have to offer Christian outreach. In *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach*, Heath writes very persuasively about what she considers to be a current dark night^[7] identified by St John of the Cross, Heath focusses on these same signs in the church today. She points to what she identifies as dryness and fruitlessness; to a loss of desire for church involvement for many people; and a holy longing that is however retained, and is perhaps growing, as we see evidenced in massive cathedral engagement, in increased church tourism and spiritual visiting, and the big market for books on prayer and spirituality. I want to suggest that the faith of the church is being tested greatly at this time, when all the traditional signs of how to navigate the future seem to be changing. And the great challenge for us in the church is a missional one: do we wait and if so, how? or do we act, and if so, how is that best enabled? The church is enjoying a very active phase currently, and so much of this is good. But not all of it I would want to suggest.

And this leads to the third missional possibility that I would like to share:

Rooting ourselves in the here and now deep in the God who calls us. I was recently offered a very helpful image called the theology of bamboo. If you are a gardener, bamboo may be more of an enemy than a friend, because it spreads ferociously, and its roots are deep and all-pervading and invasive. But we all know the exotic charm of bamboo too: it rather flirts with the viewer, moves in all directions at the slightest breeze, and its wood is flexible and useful for all sorts of things requiring pliable material. Surely, we also need flexibility and pragmatism as Christians and as people of faith in a time of challenge and change. Deeply rooted, strong and confident, able to move and adapt, change and be moulded, according to the needs of the times in which we find ourselves. I want to say that we must stop only thinking about growth in terms of money and numbers, and consider again the importance of depth, and the gift that ^[8]the virtue of patience, in its proper understanding, can offer the church today.

2

So let's turn to my first 'pin-up', Mother Julian of Norwich, whose great feast day we are celebrating, and ask ourselves an important question: how can a woman from a very different age to ours, still be a guide for mission?

I find in Julian a simplicity and matter-of-factness that is inspiring in a society that tends to be over complex and blind to wisdom. We know, of course, Julian was a true urban solitary, a woman of the city, and one able to see the signs of God all around her. As one steeped in silence, she was accomplished at conversation, Godly conversation,

in which she guided and accompanied the residents of Norwich along the labyrinth that is the life of faith.

Standing here as a Companion of Julian for ten years now, I find myself coming back to Julian day after day, and always finding something fresh, new and challenging. And I'm sure that you won't be surprised to hear that I can find much inspiration in the Revelations of Divine Love for those of us called to a more solitary form of prayer. She is perhaps the most important beacon, beckoning us to hear the call, and one who then sheds light on our journey to help chart the course of prayer deeper into the goodness of God; but what ^[9]of her wisdom that may illuminate our reflections upon presence, perseverance and patience.

Mother Julian, in the eleventh chapter of her showings, describes how she saw God in a point:

And after this I saw God in a point (that is to say in my mind), by which vision I understood that he is in all things... There was nothing unknown to him in his rightful ordering from without beginning. And therefore everything was set in order before anything was created, just as it would stand without end, and no manner of thing shall fall short of that mark. He made everything in fullness of goodness, and therefore the Blessed Trinity is always completely pleased with all his works.

And all this he showed most blessedly, meaning this: 'See, I am God. See, I am in everything. See, I do everything. See, I never lift my hands from my works, nor ever shall, without end. See, I lead everything to the end I ordained for it from without beginning by the same power, wisdom and love with which I

made it. (RDL 11)³

Presence is about simply being here, and this being here is so often about being alongside, a recognition that God is present in everyone and in everything, and the challenge for us is to be content to serve him there.

Nearly nine years ago I experienced something of this at San Damiano Friary on Dolores Street, the San Francisco home ^[10]of the Society of St Francis (SSF). An Anglican community of Franciscan brothers, they live a life of prayer and community in the city, and serve in a variety of inspiring ways. I heard of their Open Cathedral initiative, when a table is set up and the Eucharist celebrated regularly outside of the Harvey Milk Library in the Castro district; and in a similar way, the Eucharist is offered in the midst of the Tenderloin district. (No-one seems to quite know how this part of the city got its name, but the guide books advise the tourist to avoid it. It is certainly less salubrious looking than the parts around it, and I was interested to hear that it is now becoming populated by immigrants from places such as Vietnam and Cambodia. These new residents have come up with a peaceful way to try and clear the prostitutes from their district. A husband and wife, dressed in their finest clothes, will stand next to the prostitutes on the street. They will do and say nothing, but such company is not good for business. Slowly, the Tenderloin is changing). In both locations, a congregation of up to fifty or sixty will often gather, people who have a thirst for God but who feel unwelcome in the churches, or who are disillusioned with their institutional structures.

I heard of the Night Ministry. The Brothers, and others serving with them, will go about the bars and clubs of the city, into the brothels and other such places the guide books advise giving a wide berth.

They meet with people there to talk, offering acceptance and a listening ear. In hearing about this I was struck, as I am more and more, by the importance of the ministry of conversation. It was this ministry that Julian offered here in fourteenth-century Norwich. As we know, an anchorhold would typically have three windows: one on to the church next door; one onto the adjoining space where a servant may be working at tasks to support the ^[11]life of the anchorite; and a window opening to the street, where people could come and receive spiritual direction and accompaniment. Mother Julian, a model of presence, like those who follow in the footsteps of St Francis in the city bearing his name accompanying, befriending, gazing with the eyes of Christ's love.

And this presence is much about hiddenness. When things are hidden in our lives, our instincts can often take us in two ways. Either we can feel excited, like children waiting to see what the surprise might be: we feel anticipation and a sense of adventure. Or, as adults, things being hidden are more likely to bring feelings of uncertainty which can give birth to fear and anxiety. The unknown can be an unwelcome guest as we try to imagine what we cannot see, and we can find ourselves imagining the worst memories of the past, or return to our fall-back positions, where scenarios of failure and dread flood our minds and cause us to unconsciously plan for the worst possible outcomes.

In the scriptures, so much about God is hidden. As the people of God journey out of Egypt, they are led by a cloud of mist and fog by day, and by a pillar of fire at night. They do not know to what, or to whom, they are being led. They have nothing to go on other than a promise from God.

In the New Testament, Mary is given the assurance of God's favour by Gabriel, as she steps into her own cloud of unknowing in the first sentences of Luke's gospel. Later, the disciples ask Jesus for signs - he is disappointed at their lack of trust. Like us, they want to fill in the missing bits, and like us, in the absence of what seems to make sense, we can be tempted to leave, to give up; our restlessness risks us being ^[12]tempted away to what seems more certain, to carry more meaning, and may seem easier for us.

Again, from Julian's Showings,

..those things which God wishes to keep secret he himself wisely hides out of love....much that is secret is hidden and can never be known until the time that God of his goodness has made us worthy to see it.

Waiting to see challenges us to stay with a life, a practice; to remain with a partner, or with a profession that no longer gives the same nurturing sustenance we once knew. We gather, close to the very ground upon which Julian prayed, and was given the insight to illuminate the meaning of the Showings she received. Julian stayed; Julian remained; Julian waited - she has much to offer us.

Finally, homeliness and goodness. Homeliness is a great theme in the scriptures. In the Old Testament, the people of God search for the home they have been exiled from. Indeed, it is because they seem not to know how to behave at home that they forfeit their place there. But God welcomes them back. The theme of being welcomed home is central to the very beautiful story of the prodigal son, told by Luke. To come home to his father, back to the family home, is the image that Jesus chooses to use to describe what forgiveness is all about. Being reconciled is coming home to a right relationship with

others. Also, this same dynamic of forgiveness can be about coming home to a reconciliation with ourselves. To be at home in ourselves is about peace and rest, about contentment and stability. This is at the very heart of the contemplative tradition. Our prayer at its deepest is a mystical sense of at-home-ness with God.

[13] Julian's use of the term being 'one-d' with God, points to the destination we hope to reach on our journey of faith and prayer. Her writings often use the symbolism of homeliness or home-coming. She sees our frailty, our blindness to the presence of God in which we already live, move and have our being, as something of a gift from him that can be the place of his call to return back to him, a call home.

When we are fallen because of frailty or blindness, then our gracious Lord inspires us, stirs us, and calls us, and then he wills that we see our wretchedness and humbly let it be acknowledged. But he does not wish us to remain thus, nor does he will that we busy ourselves greatly about accusing ourselves, nor does he will that we be full of misery about ourselves; for he wills that we quickly attend to him; for he stands all alone and waits for us constantly, sorrowing and mourning until we come, and hastens to take us to himself; for we are his joy and his delight, and he is our cure and our life.
(RDL 79)

We exist in God now, and always will. God cannot absent himself from all that he has made and sustains. God holds us and he heals us. We do not necessarily always feel held in a way that we can describe with feeling words, but nonetheless we believe he goes on holding us, enfolding us in his love.

Most glad and happy is our Lord about our prayer, and he watches for it and he wishes to enjoy it, because with his grace it makes us like himself in character and nature. And this is his blessed will, for he says this: 'Pray inwardly, even though it seems to give you no pleasure, for it is beneficial enough though you do not perceive it. Pray inwardly, though you sense nothing, though you see nothing, yes, though you think you can achieve nothing, for in dryness in barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness, then is your prayer completely^[14] pleasing to me, though it seems to give you no pleasure. All your living is prayer in my eyes. (RDL 41)

Julian seems here to be sharing with us something of the spirit of bamboo theology. Be rooted, deep, strong and firm. Be ready to change, to see things in a new way. Go further down in your understanding, in your love, and your acceptance, than the surface dualisms that dictate this and not that. This we must surely do if we are able to be true missionaries to Julian's 'even Christians', all people that on earth do dwell.

To return to San Damiano, on Delores Street, I joined the Friary community for their open night on a Saturday. We met for prayer, then for the mass followed by a pasta supper. A group of about fifteen of us gathered along with Vanessa, a wonderful Labrador who was guide-dog to one of the congregation. Everyone was welcome, everyone valued. This sense was lived in the worship and in the welcome that overflows into the chapel worship throughout the week. The Brothers rise at 5am for an hour of adoration before the blessed sacrament. God in a point for us Christians, a reminder to us that the God whom we receive and worship in the sacrament of the Eucharist is the same God present in everyone around us, challenging us to love and to serve, challenging us to love and

accept ourselves. I learned that afresh from the Brothers following the example of San Francisco of Assisi. They seek to serve God in others whilst they learn and live that they, too, are the home of God.

3

[15] Julian's acceptance of all, and her finding the call and inspiration to live that acceptance in Christ's showing himself and his gospel to her, is shared by my next companion along the way, Brother Charles de Foucauld.

Also known as Brother Charles of Jesus, de Foucauld was born in 1858 in Strasbourg, France. He was brought up by his grandfather after the death of his parents, and Charles followed him into the military. In 1883 Charles went on an expedition to Morocco which was to be a very formative experience for him. He was impressed by the faith of the Muslims that he encountered, and this man, largely agnostic since his adolescence, began to pray "My God, if you exist, let me come to know you."

A pilgrimage to the Holy Land revealed for him a vocation to live a life like Jesus at Nazareth, and as his faith journey continued he spent seven years as a Trappist monk in France, and later in Syria. On leaving this form of life, Charles began to lead a life of prayer and adoration near to a convent of Poor Clare nuns in Nazareth. Charles was ordained priest in 1901 at the age of 43, and left his home for the inspiring surroundings of the Sahara Desert, first living at Ben Abbes, then amongst the Tuaregs of Hoggar, at Tamanrasset.

Charles wanted to be among those who were, 'the furthest removed, the most abandoned.' He wanted all who drew close to him to find in him a brother, 'a universal brother.' In a great respect for the culture

and faith of those among whom he lived, his desire was to 'shout the Gospel with his life'. 'I would like to be sufficiently good that people would ^[16]say, "If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?"' On the evening of December 1st 1916, he was killed by a band of marauders who had encircled his house.

Brother Charles had always dreamed of sharing his vocation with others. After having written, and rewritten, several rules for religious life, and finding that no one seemed to stay to live that challenging life with him, he came to the conclusion that this 'life of Nazareth' could be led by anyone and in a variety of circumstances. Today the spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld encompasses several associations of the faithful, religious communities such as the Little Brothers of Nazareth and Little Sisters of the Poor. His life is also the inspiration for the Communities of Jerusalem found in cities including Paris and Rome, and for the Jesus Caritas fraternities of priests and of laypeople.

I now regularly visit a group of four Little Sisters of Jesus who live in a tiny council flat in a high-rise block in Hoxton. Sister Cathy, and her little sisters, make me very welcome. and offer me hospitality, including allowing me to pray for an hour in their tiny chapel overlooking east London. The view, 23 stories up, is amazing!

I got to know Cathy and her little sisters from a newspaper article about their life inspired by Charles de Foucauld. The Little Sisters, formed in 1939, and the Little Brothers, formed in 1933, are communities devoted to littleness and gentleness, adoration of the blessed sacrament, and living and working among the poor as one of them. This life seems faithful to the words of Brother Charles from his journal written on retreat in Ephraim in 1898:

[17] I instructed you continually for thirty years, not in words, but by my silence and example..... The example of poverty, lowliness, recollection, withdrawal: the obscurity of a life hidden in God, a life of prayer, penance and withdrawal, completely lost in God, buried deep in him.⁴

The prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is core to the life of those who follow the legacy of Brother Charles. The sacrament is Christ's presence, journeying with them, staying next to them, living with and in them.

Part of the power of Little Sister Cathy and her Hoxton community is the longevity of their presence. They have stayed, they have 'pitched their tent' in a deeply incarnational way. In John's gospel, when John's disciples meet Jesus and ask where he is staying, he says to them 'Come and see'. This theme of abiding deep and important in John's gospel: Jesus abides in the bosom of the Father and we are invited to abide, to remain there too, in Christ and in God in our mystical life. As St Paul invites us, in the third chapter of his letter to the Colossians - 'live in Christ, hidden in God'.

This is surely at the heart of mission of contemplative practice? It's not that prayer feeds us, and enables us to go and do some good work, although that is surely a good thing. No, I think to stop here is missing something vital. It is that in contemplative prayer, the God in whom our very identity is hidden with Christ, slowly comes to be more fully formed within us, seeking to bring himself to others through us, as ^[18]food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, justice for the imprisoned, compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan.

Perhaps it is in our confidence to live this hiddenness that we must let go of any way to assess or measure the effectiveness of what we

are about, of what we do. The contemplative prayer we associate with Mother Julian, and with Brother Charles, the prayer that so many of us are called to practice today, means we are regarded as somewhat odd by many who observe us. What are we doing? What is going on? What are we achieving? Isn't it just a waste of time?

In his commentary to his famous poem *The Spiritual Canticle*, St John of the Cross reminds us of our need for poverty before the living God. He writes, 'The discreet lover does not care to ask for what she lacks or desires, but only indicates this need so the Beloved may do what he pleases [...] There are three reasons for this: First, the Lord knows what is suitable for us better than we do; second, the Beloved has more compassion when he beholds the need and resignation of a soul that loves him; third, the soul is better safeguarded against self-love and possessiveness by indicating its lack, rather than asking for what in its opinion is wanting.'⁵

With regards to the current drive for mission, and the agenda for church growth, a commendable agenda without doubt, I think we must ask the question of how much are we prepared to be poor and wretched before our Lord, and how ^[19]much do we think the answers are just to be found in doing what we have always done? If, as Elaine Heath has suggested, mentioned above, this is the time of the dark night, St John of the Cross would rather we didn't follow blind guides.

I would like to end this section with Brother Charles' beautiful *Prayer of Abandonment*, which helps us to be poor before our poor Christ,

Father,

I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do,
I thank you.

I am ready for all,
I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me
and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands
I commend my soul;
I offer it to you,
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself
into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.

4

And so to my third 'pin-up', Father Bill Kirkpatrick of Earl's Court.

'The only thing that matters to me is that I continue to flow with the Holy Spirit' This sentence ends the chapter about Father Bill in a 1994 publication, *Revelations: The Clergy Questioned*. Mary Loudon's book made a very significant impression on me when I was exploring ordination, and the chapter about Bill Kirkpatrick especially.

My interest in Father Bill came from the fact that I could not only see him as an example of someone placing a very high priority on prayer, but he seemed to be a possible gay role model, someone embracing a journey towards freedom, which struck me powerfully in a church where so many of the priests I knew were struggling to find this in their own lives. Thus I felt very blessed to have the opportunity to meet Bill Kirkpatrick in 1999.

I was at St Stephen's House theological college, and my main summer placement was with the HIV and AIDS charity CARA, based in West London. Father Bill was part of the ^[21]CARA network, and one of the listeners that the charity made available to their service users. The Reverend Liz Russel, the priest supervising my placement, phoned Bill up one day, on my request, and made an appointment for me to go and meet with him.

Father Bill lived in a fairly spacious flat in Earls Court. From what I remember of it, it was in the basement of what would once have been a very large house. I remember looking out of a window, or perhaps it was a window in a door, and seeing the shed in the small garden, tucked below the pavement, that was Father Bill's chapel. I was very interested in this space as for most of my life of faith I have been fascinated by other people's prayer spaces, and I asked Bill about his chapel and his prayer routine:

"I tend not to pray the Office, as the work doesn't really suit it. But each day I will meditate from anything between 30 minutes and two hours." For a rather high church ordinand, this both excited and rather scandalised me. I was excited to hear of a priest who felt utterly confident to set aside that sort of time for prayer, but scandalised because the all-important office of Morning and Evening

Prayer was being neglected. Interestingly, sometimes I think I would probably say the same about my own ministry now!

For me, Father Bill made a clear and very authentic connection between listening, openness, and prayer. In their interview, he said to Mary Loudon, "The thing that really gets me about the church is how it hasn't picked up, in ways ^[22]it might have been able to pick up, some of the agonies of today." And this listening is at the heart of Father Bill's whole theological and missional understanding of what he is called to be as a priest. His authentic modelling has inspired my priestly ministry, particularly in recent times. The stress he puts upon the centrality of contemplative living, amid all the activity of life, is refreshing and encouraging. This was at the very centre of Reaching Out, an expression of mission and engagement he founded, partly under the leadership and advice of Mother Mary Clare of the Sisters of the Love of God.

Reaching Out was based in his Earls Court flat from 1978. The costs of the flat, and his living expenses, were covered by the Sir Maurice Laing foundation. Laing was concerned about the presence of many homeless and vulnerable young men in the Earls Court area, many of whom were rent boys. In describing his mission, Father Bill writes that Reaching Out... :

Means first and foremost for me 'being there' for anyone living in the Earls Court area [...] it is 'being there' for those who are seeking some form of alternative support and assistance, whatever the source of their differing needs.

At the very basis of this missional commitment to serve is a desire to serve the God who calls. He goes on:

At the same time it means for me daring to be vulnerable to the call of God and towards those who call on me. 'Being there' is nurtured by a prayerful listening to God, to others and to myself as a contemplative activator quietly and unobtrusively reaching out in to the area of Earls Court and beyond.

[23] In citing the inspiration for his vision for Reaching Out, Father Bill draws on Jesus' own mission and ministry as we read it in the gospels. Jesus was deeply contemplative within a very active lifestyle, often taking himself apart to pray, and then proclaiming, 'whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters you did also for me'. In contemplative prayer, the God in whom our very identity is hidden with Christ, slowly comes to be more fully formed within us, seeking to bring himself to others through us, as food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, justice for the imprisoned, compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan. The role of a priest is much about availability, and this is surely a central mission of both the parish priest today, and the priesthood of all believers, and this availability needs to be considered in different and varied forms.

To return to my three missional themes, our availability to the people we are called to serve is about *simply being here*. Now I don't suggest that this means we have to be available 24/7, a sure recipe for burn out. But I am thinking more of that availability which is about authenticity. Recently, speaking with an American Roman Catholic who is living in London and attending my Anglican church, I asked her why she had chosen us. She reported to me that whilst it had something to do with the welcome, the worship and the music, she decided to try us in the first place because my priest colleague is female, and because we note on our website home page that gay people are welcome. That is surely something about availability.

Being here, and being ourselves. I felt humbled and privileged to hear this.

Our availability to God in prayer, to stay in the darkness and be moulded as God would shape us. To passively wait on the ^[24]beautiful attentions of the divine artist, however obscure and hidden may be his meaning. To return to the other two missional themes: '*Will you remain with me?*' our heavenly Father calls out to us. Our availability to ourselves seeking to be authentic people '*Rooting ourselves in the here and now deep in the God who calls us*'.

In 1965, Karl Rahner wrote his seminal work *Concern for the Church*, in which he made his classic remark 'the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.' The Jesuit predicted that in the not too distant future Christianity will become marginalized, and in many parts of the world would face persecution, or at least the loss of social prestige, that 'there will be no earthly advantage in being a Christian,' and faith will be a matter of personal conviction rather than institutional affiliation. Fifty years on, Rahner's quote stays relevant. In a church in the dark night, as Elaine Heath persuasively argues, contemplative churches are needed if we are going to nurture a church that desires to be little and substantial; whose stability means it is confident to be here for the long haul; and a school of patience calling roots deeper into the life of God.

I have recently discovered a contemplative online blog called *Patheos*. The blogger, Carl McColman writes:

When Christianity places its hope just in the afterlife, it unwittingly plays into the hand of social and political forces that are invested in the current status quo (with all its

attendant injustice). But when Christian hope in the 'abundant life' that Jesus promised, and sees that hope as beginning in the present moment, then there's a greater incentive for a spirituality of both personal and planetary transformation. 'Planetary transformation' means working ^[25] for peace, justice, environmental sustainability, and various issues ranging from fighting human trafficking to advocating for green energy. But personal transformation is just as important..... ⁸

This, I would say, is where the ancient practices associated with the semi-eremitic life have much to offer us in terms of our three missional themes: hiddenness, stability and patience.

5

In conclusion, I have reflected today on my own story that has running through it what might be considered a consistent thread leading me to drink at the waters of silence and solitude. This is a model of life I have described as semi-eremitic. Father Bill Kirkpatrick, one steeped in a similarly contemplative and eremitic styled life, living in a whirl of activity, practiced this life to nurture an availability to others, to God, to his partner, and to his many friends. I think he shows us a very important model of missional contemplative ministry. In the contemplative prayer, practiced early every morning, in his beautiful subterranean chapel, the God in whom Father Bill's identity, hidden with Christ, slowly came to be more fully formed within him. Christ used his servant Bill to bring himself to others through the life of this humble ^[26]priest: the homeless through Centrepont; the rent boys of Earls Court, the AIDS sufferers of CARA and beyond: food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, justice for the imprisoned, compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan.

Julian's showings, perhaps even more relevant today than when she first shared them, offers a Christ who is inclusive, welcoming and non-judgmental in a Christian world that struggles to be those three things in many places. Her gospel is homely, is small enough to fit our own lives but beckons us to be the 'more'. It is to this that the Prayer of Abandonment lived by Brother Charles signposts us towards. It is he who discovered that the challenging life of the desert is actually about a life modelling the hidden years of Christ's formation in everyday life, and an option open to all.

Each of my three 'pin-ups', as I have called them, invite us in different ways to offer ourselves, to place our lives on the altar in love and generosity, not knowing how God will choose to use us. He is the potter who has plans and dreams for us. Just be there. Let him take control. Ask him to help us let go of the need to be in charge of the rudder on this sea of unknowing.

And for me, it has been in companionship with Julian, amongst the Companions of Julian, that this vocation has found fertile ground in which to grow, and I commend anyone for whom my humble offering has struck a chord, to have a word with one of us about our life if that is helpful.

The last word I would like to give to Elaine Heath, and her suggestion of the dark night of the current church which I ^[27] certainly want to explore more in my own thinking. She writes:

The dark night is here, even now. While the sun sets on Christendom in the West, the saints, mystics, and martyrs beckon to the church as great cloud of witnesses, calling us to transformation. The church will persevere through the night and emerge alive on the other side, not because of church

programs, but because God's love has kept it. But to get there, we need the wisdom of the mystics, the holy ones of God'.⁹

Mother Julian of Norwich, pray for us
Blessed Brother Charles of Jesus, pray for us
Father Bill Kirkpatrick, pray for us.

Amen

Bruce Batstone



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9. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, p17f.